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Ethics Education: A Model

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Abstract

This paper proposes a model of ethics education that is framed as an holistic approach to the problem of how to teach ethics. It recognizes that for ethics education to be successful, individuals and corporations must have an appreciation of their role in the society at large. In addition, there needs to be a preparedness on the part of the corporation to engage in an ethical manner with the marketplace with whom they interact. Once the impact of these external factors is realised, then one can focus on the ethics education of the employees, part of which involves placing emphasis on context as it relates to the organization and the wider society as a whole. It is suggested that an ethics education program needs to provide a framework for understanding the concepts of ethics and moral development. Using this framework as the basis for the education offered, the education program is then expanded into an examination of a range of ethical issues presented in a variety of ways.

Key Words: business ethics, ethics education, model of business ethics

Introduction

The study of business ethics has been evolving since the latter half of the twentieth century. In the last fifteen years in Australia, it has risen to prominence as a distinct and high profile area of corporate concern and academic interest (Wood and Rimmer 2003). The corporate activities, by some of our most recognised entrepreneurs and others, have achieved notoriety within Australia. The reasons for this continuing state of ethical and, in many cases, legal malpractice are difficult to pinpoint with any degree of certainty. These events may well occur because of systemic problems within the corporate world: a corporate world that is no longer bounded by geopolitical frontiers (Wood and Callaghan 2003).

The focus on increasing corporate wealth is at the centre of our commercial traditions. The packages of senior executives are tied to such increases. The ways that we have of keeping score for corporate success produces a set of circumstances and an environment that tempts one to flirt with danger. The way that the game is played and the way that the score is kept places before executives and others in the corporation a temptation to mask reality by less than a full and frank disclosure, and in extreme cases contrived malfeasance, about the economic health of the organization.

This paper proposes a model of ethics education (Appendix 1) that is based upon an holistic approach to the problem of how to teach ethics. It recognizes that for ethics education to be successful, individuals and corporations must have an appreciation of their role in the society at large. In addition, there needs to be a preparedness on the part of the corporation to engage in an ethical manner with the marketplace with whom they interact. Once the impact of these external factors is realised, then one can focus on the ethics education of the employees, part of which involves placing that education in context as it relates to the organization and the wider society as a whole.

The Individual, the Organization and Society

Twenty years ago, an examination of any management textbook would have revealed that there was little reference made to the ethical behaviour of either individuals or organizations. As members of society during the 1960s and 1970s became more vocal about what was happening around them, we have seen a greater focus placed on the behaviour of individuals and organizations (Robbins and Munker 1994).

Whether we have witnessed a decline in ethical standards of managers as some suggest (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg 1997), or whether it is merely the fact that society no longer accepts the behaviour that was previously acceptable, there has been a change in attitude towards ethical behaviour and social responsibility. Incidents such as The Challenger Disasters, Bhopal, the Exxon Valdez, HIH, OneTel, ANZ and NAB, have heightened the awareness of our society to the exploits of these types of organizations and these rogue individuals. As a consequence of these incidents we now see the Australian Stock Exchange implement guidelines for appropriate
behaviour, the concept of 'corporate governance' is a term that has emerged since the 1980's. Chapter 8 of the US Sentencing Guidelines lists a range of ethical activities which mitigates penalties handed out to organizations.

Society has become more critical and demanding and with this has come greater expectations of the behaviour of organizations and people who work within these organizations (Robbins and Mulerji 1994). To date there has been a lag between what is expected of organizations and individuals in terms of ethical standards and social responsibility (Robbins and Mulerji 1994). It is no longer acceptable to dump waste wherever it is convenient. It is no longer acceptable to go overseas and exploit local workers at a cost to their health and their well-being. Society's expectation of business has clearly changed and it is the responsibility of all organizations not just to monitor these changes, but to respond to them in a proactive (rather than reactive) way, to ensure that they have the support of their stakeholders. From the point of view of an organization, it is often a balancing act to determine which of its stakeholders' views need to be considered first. This is the reason that the issue of acting ethically and in a socially responsible manner has proven to date to be so difficult for many organizations.

Society expects that if organizations do the wrong thing then the law will step in and regulate the situation. This is the less preferred option for organizations that would rather self-regulate than have a set of regulations imposed upon them. Unfortunately for many organizations, this self-regulation either doesn't go far enough, has no teeth when something does go wrong, or does not consider all contingencies. This results in events which society finds repugnant and organizations are then forced to address these concerns after the event and when enormous damage has been done to the organization's reputation and/or the individual or the society. Organizations need to understand their place within the society and that they exist because the society allows them to do so.

The Recognition of the Need for Ethics in the Organization

Business is a partnership between the society, its citizens, and corporations. We all benefit if all parties recognise that we thrive individually on the success of the whole. Hence, organizations need to consider their relationships with all parties as one of a partnership focus and not one of adversarial combat. Our business system, which is becoming more globally intertwined every day, needs to be a continually evolving one, whereby we strive to make a better and more encompassing system that respects the views and perspective of all participants equally (Wood 2002). Organizations however, must recognise this need for them to be ethical in the marketplace. They must have a genuine desire to be ethical: a desire that is borne out of ideals based on altruism and not those predicated on a perspective of being mercenary.

Formally Engaging with Ethics

Companies cannot just wish to be ethical. In order to be acting ethically, corporations and their managers must look at establishing and maintaining an ethical culture (Sims 1991). This task is not an easy one, for in trying to establish an ethical culture, previous mores of accepted behaviour and company practice may often be challenged. Maintaining an ethical culture does not happen by company decree alone. It must be interwoven into all aspects of the company's activities (Wood 2002). The critical factor is that time and resources must be devoted to this ideal in order to give it the best possible chance of success. This new or modified culture is one that must start with a focus on the employees and shareholders of the organization, for they are the ones who must embrace the direction that is intended by the senior management of organizations.

Communicating the Ethos of the Organization

As a result of individual differences between employees, organizations cannot assume that employees will all act in accordance with the company's ethical policies. Without the support of the organization in the critical areas of education and the protection of employee rights, there is little likelihood that organizations will be able to foster the desired ethical behaviour. Organizations cannot expect employee adherence to the ethical principles inherent within the organization, if they do not examine their current practices and consider ways that may improve the facilitation of their objectives in respect to business ethics. Not to do so devalues the positive impacts that such a program may have for the organization, its staff and other stakeholders (Adams, Taschian & Stone 2001; James 2000; Watruha, Chonko & Loe 2001).
Ethics Education

Any pedagogical process intended to develop a practical understanding of character or virtue should include a critical process through which individuals can understand and appreciate their own character traits and biases, the traits and biases of others, and the relationship between individual ethical orientation and performance within rule-bound organizations (May 1980). Hence, the first stage of any ethics education program is to provide the participants with a framework to enable them to develop and understand their personal ethical perspectives. Without such a framework there is no basis upon which to build further education.

According to Kohlberg and others, a major goal of education is to stimulate development of individuals through the stages of moral reasoning (Frenkel 1977). The Cognitive Moral Development (CMD) approach to moral education as espoused by Kohlberg (1971) concentrates on developing individuals' reasoning patterns so that they can better integrate the interests of various organizational stakeholders into their decision making. This approach to ethics education assists employees with working through ethical issues rather than exhorting them, through traditional ethics 'training', to 'do the right thing', or imposing prescriptive codes of conduct upon them. Any attempt to implement a mechanical decision-making process for resolving ethical issues is illusory (Brady 1999).

While Kohlberg's work has been criticised on the basis of gender, cultural and age bias, there is considerable evidence to support the belief that an ethics education program should integrate the concepts that Kohlberg espoused (Penn and Collier 1983; Wright 1995). The capacity for an individual to demonstrate principled moral reasoning can and must be developed by means of focused, systematic and long term education effort (Penn and Collier, 1985). What one should hope for is "...the cultivation of critical awareness of both the moral problems presented in business and the means of applying some moral principles and reasoning in order to achieve clarity, the avoidance of logical fallacies, an understanding of moral concepts and critical examination of arguments (Morgan 1996 p.52).

The aim of any ethics education program should not therefore be moral conversion, but rather about developing the process of ethical analysis (MacIagan 1994). This task is done by raising awareness and providing employees with concepts, theories and skills to enable them to engage in moral reasoning and decision-making from an informed basis.

The Framework of an Ethics Education Program

Individuals learn in a variety of ways. For ethics education to be successful employees must be exposed to a number of different but complementary methods for studying ethics. There is sufficient recognition of the value of Kohlberg's framework to form part of the model, but we would argue that in order to encapsulate adult learning principles that recognize the fact that individuals learn in diverse ways, and also needing to take cultural and gender issues into consideration, the organization and indeed the individual would best be served by being presented with a range of learning approaches that incorporate moral dilemmas, role plays and discussions. This diversified approach should not be seen as onerous for the individual. Rather, it is designed as an opportunity to expose the individual to different ways of communicating the ethos of the ethics education to be offered. The basis of this idea is to use examples with which the staff are familiar. Our contention is that this approach will lead ultimately to a more balanced approach to the assessment of ethical dilemmas faced by the individual.

Researchers, such as Trevino (1992), Brown (1994) and Thorne Le Clair and Ferrell (2000), suggest the use of participation and role-plays as being ideal for ethics and moral education. Often, it is the minor every day issues that employees encounter which can cause the most difficulties in making ethical decisions. Therefore, the aim of a role play should be to draw upon the employees' exposure to commonly encountered every day events and use those identified events in order to raise one's moral consciousness (Weber and Gillespie 1998).

One of the difficulties in teaching ethics in organizations is being able to determine, measure or even predict actual behaviour in real ethical situations (Weber and Gillespie 1998). Ferris (1990) discusses the need to present a 'blizzard of moral dilemmas'. The aim of this method is to virtually overload students with situations likely to produce ethical problems. Ferris contends that the objective of such an approach is to have the students recognize the need for a framework or 'moral anchor' that they can use in order to develop a consistent and rational response to whatever situation presents itself to them.
In their study, which examines the improvement of moral development through an increase in reflection, Lopez and Lopez (1998 p.234) found that “the teaching and learning of attentional strategies, of problem solving procedures, of the anticipation of consequence, of verbal self control by using internal self-speech and the learning of how to take the necessary time before dealing with problems, all of which form part of the process for increasing reflectivity, enable the individuals to improve their moral judgement.” Being critically reflective involves assessing the accuracy and validity of norms as they relate to our decision-making processes. “Adult moral learning focuses on the contradictions involved in fusing universal moral standards with the pragmatic constraints and situational imperatives of relationships, work and community involvement.” (Brookfield 1998 p.9). As Brady (1999) says “Any dreams of a mechanical decision procedure resolving issues is illusory. It is unlikely that a technique can be found to replace human thoughtfulness”: This idea of ‘human thoughtfulness’ can only materialize if individuals are presented with a range of means and strategies for addressing ethical dilemmas that they face in the organization. It is about judging the ‘fit’ between the moral rules we have learned over the course of our life, and the applicability and relevance they have to our adult and working life.

Maintenance and Review

The issue of ongoing reflection is a critical element of the model. Reflection on experience has been shown to be able to connect to theoretical understanding (Maclagan 1994) and thus individuals can benefit from follow up programs that revisit the theory and examine their experiences since the education sessions were held. These sessions will be the opportunity to discuss and reflect on various ethical dilemmas that individuals have encountered and to reflect on the decision-making process and outcomes. For this to be of value to the organization, the facilitator needs to be non-critical of all suggestions, in order to encourage open participation. Any situations of note should be recorded anonymously for future use within the organization’s ethics program. From an organizational point of view this is perhaps the most critical stage. There needs to be regular and ongoing opportunities for individuals to reflect on recent examples or incidents, how they were handled, as well as discuss evolving issues both internal to the organisation and externally. In addition, current organizational practices and policies need to be reviewed to ensure that they not only meet the evolving needs of the organization, but also to consider how these might compare to what other organisations in either the same or different industries are doing.

Conclusion

If an organization chooses to go down the path of embracing ethical standards and beliefs, it is incumbent upon that organization to create environments that support ethical behaviour and to inculcate within the organization policies, procedures and structures that support such action (Wood 2002). This model is designed to propose, through an integrated ethics education program, a way to achieve this goal of supporting staff that have to implement the ethical ethos of the organization into their every day activities.

A diversity of educational methods has been suggested to assist in the education process: a process that is predicated upon an acknowledgement that individuals learn through different medium and that in the case of ethics education it is not about one correct way to assess a situation but the ideal is to arm employees with a range of applicable strategies that can be used to assist them in their dealings for and on behalf of the organization.

References


Appendix I.

Ethics Education Model

Individual/Organisation/Society

Recognition of the Need for Ethics in the Organisation

Formally Engaging with Ethics

Communicating the Ethos of the Company

Ethics Education

Moral Dilemmas → Role Plays → Discussion

Reflections

Maintenance & Review